

Health Advisory:

Dangers Associated With Keeping Primates as Pets

October 6, 2006

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Health Advisories provide important information for a specific incident or situation, including that impacting neighboring states; may not require immediate action.

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Health Advisory
October 6, 2006

FROM: JULIA M. ECKSTEIN
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SUBJECT: Dangers Associated With Keeping Primates as Pets

The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) strongly discourages persons from having any primate, including any type of monkey, as a pet. DHSS issued a News Release on October 6, 2006, entitled, "State Health Department Releases Health Advisory Urging Missourians Not to Keep Monkeys as Pets," which is reproduced beginning on the next page. It provides specific information on the problems that primate owners will face, including the potential for exposure to serious infectious diseases, and it also describes the harm that can come to the animal when people attempt to treat it as a pet.

The purpose of this Health Advisory is to ensure that medical and public health professionals are aware of the very significant health and safety issues associated with contact with primates. While the exact number of privately owned primates is unknown, their popularity as pets has increased, and any medical provider could have, among his or her patients, individuals who have close contact with these animals.

Primates, especially as they mature, become very unpredictable, and potentially extremely aggressive in their behavior. They have, with their teeth and nails, the ability to inflict very serious, and in rare instances potentially fatal, injuries.

Primates also carry numerous infectious agents and parasites that are transmissible to humans. As a consequence, persons in close contact with these animals could potentially be at risk for acquiring a number of viral diseases (e.g., rabies, hepatitis, B virus encephalomyelitis, monkeypox, viral hemorrhagic fevers), bacterial diseases (e.g., salmonellosis, shigellosis, tuberculosis), and fungal diseases (e.g., candidiasis, ringworm), as well as diseases caused by intestinal protozoans and worms, and infestations with external parasites such as lice, mites, and fleas. (For a detailed discussion of the zoonoses associated with primates, see <http://pin.primate.wisc.edu/aboutp/pets/zoonoses.html>.)

One agent of particular concern is B virus, or *Cercopithecine herpesvirus* 1, which is found in virtually all adult macaque monkeys, including rhesus macaques, pig-tailed macaques, and cynomolgus monkeys. (Other primates pose no known risk for B virus infection unless they have had the opportunity to acquire B virus directly from a macaque.) Infected monkeys usually have no or mild symptoms, but in humans, B virus infection can result in a fatal encephalomyelitis. Though B virus disease in humans is extremely rare, it has often resulted in death (an estimated 80% of untreated patients die, and neurologic sequelae are common in survivors). Transmission of B virus typically occurs through bites, scratches, or mucocutaneous exposure to the tissues or secretions of infected macaques. It has been noted that when potentially seropositive macaques have been "domesticated" as pets, opportunities for exposure to B virus are frequent. Persons who have been bitten by a macaque or had other potentially significant exposures should be evaluated promptly by a physician. Note that the most important action in a case of potential exposure to B virus is to immediately and thoroughly cleanse the wound or exposure site. An exposed person should be instructed to immediately cleanse the affected area for at least 15 minutes. Potentially exposed skin should be washed with povidone iodine, chlorhexidine, or detergent soap. In addition to being washed, wounds may be gently massaged to increase their contact with the cleansing solution. Eyes or mucous membranes potentially exposed to B virus should be irrigated immediately with sterile saline solution or water for 15 minutes.

If the exposure is believed to warrant prophylactic treatment with antiviral agents, this treatment must be started within 24 hours of the exposure to maximize the chances that it will be effective. Specific recommendations for patient evaluation, treatment, and prevention have been developed by a working group formed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These recommendations are available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/BVIRUS.pdf>. Consultation regarding the evaluation and clinical management of potentially exposed persons is available from DHSS's State Public Health Veterinarian, Dr. Howard Pue, at (800) 392-0272. Additional information on B virus infection from CDC's National Center for Infectious Diseases can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/bvirus.htm>. Information regarding diagnostic testing of patients and primates following an exposure incident, as well as additional educational resources, are available from Georgia State University's National B Virus Resource Center at <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwvir>.

Medical professionals who have primate owners as patients are encouraged to discuss with these individuals the very real disadvantages and dangers of trying to keep these animals as pets, and to strongly recommend that they have the animals humanely euthanized or sent to a reputable sanctuary.

Any questions, and any requests for further information or consultation, should be directed to DHSS's State Public Health Veterinarian, Dr. Howard Pue, at (800) 392-0272.

Additional sources of information:

1. Primate Info Net, Library and Information Service, National Primate Research Center, University of Wisconsin – Madison. <http://pin.primate.wisc.edu/aboutp/pets>.
 2. The Humane Society of the United States, *Fact and Fiction: Monkeys and Apes as Pets*.
http://www.hsus.org/wildlife/issues_facing_wildlife/should_wild_animals_be_kept_as_pets/fact_and_fiction_on_monkeys_and_apes_as_pets.html.
 3. Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Acquisition and Disposition Policy, Paragraph V.2, Regarding Disposition of Primates. <http://www.aza.org/AboutAZA/ADPolicy>.
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NEWS RELEASE
MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SENIOR SERVICES
October 6, 2006

State Health Department Releases Health Advisory Urging Missourians Not to Keep Monkeys as Pets

The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) today released a general health advisory describing the risks of owning monkeys and other non-human primates. The department strongly discourages Missourians from keeping primates as pets.

According to Dr. Howard Pue, State Public Health Veterinarian, private ownership of monkeys, apes, and “lower primates” such as bushbabies is not uncommon in Missouri and a number of other states. Dr. Pue said the trade in these animals is largely unregulated, so the exact number of privately owned primates is unknown. However, their popularity as “pets” has increased because they are intelligent and have some human-like characteristics, and because they have been portrayed in movies and on television as cute, harmless, and adaptable to human social settings.

Dr. Pue said the view that primates are harmless and can be raised like humans is a gross misconception, since they are capable of inflicting tremendous physical damage and transmitting numerous infectious diseases to people.

"Most people who acquire primates as pets do so as a whim or out of curiosity, not realizing the dangers they and their families might face," Dr. Pue said. "Documented cases describe people who sustained horrible physical wounds inflicted by the long canine teeth and weapon-like nails of primates who turned on them. It's just a bad idea for the average Missourian to own a monkey," he added.

Dr. Pue noted that infant primates are docile and tractable, as any young animal tends to be. But captive primates will begin to ascend the social structure of their human family as they mature, just as they would in the wild, where they normally congregate in groups with a strict social hierarchy. Primates, by virtue of their strength and ability to inflict damage with teeth and nails, soon achieve supremacy over children in the family social order. Even adults are no match for a mature primate – a 20 pound monkey can quickly overwhelm a 200 pound man. Captive breeding and hand rearing will not eliminate the need for the primate to climb the social order – it is "hard wired" into their genetic makeup.

Along with physical threats, primates carry many infectious diseases and parasites that can be transmitted to humans. These include viruses (e.g., measles, rabies, Marburg, Ebola, hepatitis), bacteria (e.g., tuberculosis, salmonella, shigella), fungi (e.g., candidiasis, ringworm), intestinal protozoans and worms, and external parasites such as lice, mites, and fleas. Of particular note is the herpes B virus, which is found in virtually all adult macaque monkeys, although any monkey housed with a macaque can contract and carry the virus. Infection with this virus in the various species of macaques, which include the common rhesus and cynomolgus monkeys, usually results in no apparent disease.

Infected monkeys often give a negative laboratory test, since the virus can "hide" in the body. However, the virus can be present in the saliva and other fluids of the monkey, and poses a severe health threat to anyone bitten by this animal. Infection in humans may result in ascending encephalomyelitis (inflammation of the brain and covering membranes). While herpes B virus has only been documented in about 40 people, 80 percent of them died from the infection. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that a macaque bite – or exposure of the eyes, nose, mouth, or broken skin to saliva from a macaque – be treated as an emergency situation. The person must be evaluated by a physician and treated with anti-viral agents within 24 hours of the bite to maximize the chance that treatment will be effective.

Added to significant physical and health threats, primates can also be difficult and very expensive to keep for various reasons, according to Dr. Pue. By the time a primate reaches sexual maturity (which varies greatly by species, but averages four to eight years of age), it has developed many undesirable or even dangerous traits.

"Primates generally cannot be 'housebroken,' and may relieve themselves anywhere at anytime. They are very uninhibited animals that may engage in natural activities that are embarrassing for people," said Dr. Pue. Dr. Pue said primates also become extremely unpredictable, often lashing out with teeth and nails with no warning when frightened, surprised, or frustrated. Unlike a domesticated animal such as a dog, primates perceive punishment as a threat and often respond through physical retaliation.

"I may be painting an unpleasant picture, but I hope to provide people with a realistic view of what owning a primate can mean, hopefully before they buy one," Dr. Pue said.

Primates may live from 30 to 60 years, which places a tremendous burden on the owner. Once the animal has grown beyond the "cuddly" stage and become unmanageable, owners may abuse it or keep it locked in a cage, which usually makes the situation worse. Getting rid of a troublesome primate is generally difficult, since most zoos do not accept them and reputable sanctuaries are at or near capacity.

Private ownership of primates is expensive (stringent dietary needs, destruction of household items by inquisitive or unmanageable animals), time-consuming, presents the owner with the potential of legal liability for medical bills and lawsuits from people injured by the animal, and is inhumane in the vast majority of cases. Infant primates are taken from their mothers at a very young age, depriving them of the nourishing and socializing relationships that are needed for their proper physical and psychological development.

Primates are wild animals that do not have the ability to bond with humans that has evolved in dogs and cats over thousands of years. Through improper societal role models, lack of constant companionship, inadequate diet and housing, and exposure to diseases from people, primates in a household setting often become unhealthy, maladjusted, and a threat to the people around them. Therefore, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services highly discourages private ownership of primates. Primates should instead be maintained in educational and scientific institutions under federal and/or state regulation to protect the health of humans and to promote proper care and well-being of these animals.
